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BFE Critical Response

BFE, a play written by Julia Cho, describes the events of a 14-year-old Asian girl named Panny who is presented alongside with several dysfunctional characters: her mother, Isabel, who continuously pushes her to get plastic surgery to fix her Asian features, her uncle Lefty and his love interest, Panny’s much older love interest Hugo, and other supporting people. Tying the play together is a serial rapist who goes after blonde white girls, and this keeps the whole community on edge. A production of BFE was directed by Farley Richmond and presented at the Seney-Stovall Chapel with an ensemble cast. Being fortunate to have experienced seeing this play in live action, I know that there are many aspects of the production which then develop into the seamless story which the audience sees onstage.

Because the play is set in the 1990’s, I expected the costumes to represent that proper era. The design team did a great job of bringing the feel of that time period to life on the stage. All the characters wore clothes which resembled their own personalities but also reflected the proper decade. Having Isabel in a pink bath robe the whole time exemplified the aspect of her agoraphobia and feminine traits. She hasn’t left her home in a while, so being in a robe shows that she stays home in comfortable clothing, rather than exploring what the world has to offer. The pink shows that she is has “typical” womanly traits; on the outside she is superficial and only cares about her looks, which relates to having a typical girly color on robe. Panny’s hair in scrunchies and the loose jeans capture the essence of a plain 14-year-old girl with no remarkable physical features and of someone who has a “plain” 90’s look. For Hae-Yoon’s costume, I was confused at first as to why she was dressed in what seemed like a flight attendant uniform, but in my interpretation later, I think she was wearing that to show the distance between her life in Korea and Panny’s life in the USA. Dressing in that kind of uniform was smart because it showed their relationship as pen pals from across the globe, without being too obvious that this was the case. The most interesting costume was of the rapist man because he had an infamous “pedo-stache”. It is stereotypically seen as creepy, which this man was. The long coat and green colors had an air of mystery and aversion to him.

The props were very minimal but were used to their greatest extents. Before seeing the play, I wasn’t sure how the props would translate along the frequent and sometimes abrupt scene changes. I was pleasantly surprised as to how well only a few boxes worked so well for almost every single scene. Those black boxes were universally used and did not distract the audience. Other props included the TV, telephones, and a longer table in the back. These also were kept at a minimum. The use of plain looking props kept us glued to the dialogue and actions of the characters, rather than somewhere else which could potentially make the audience lose track or focus of the play. My favorite idea was having Hae-Yoon on the balcony in the beginning; this was definitely a great way to implement the pen-pal, long distance relationship between them two. Because they only communicate with letters, the production team must get creative to show them in live action. They definitely got creative doing that for this aspect, as the play continued, Hae-Yoon got closer and closer to the main stage. I think this was a way to show that her role was getting more important over time.

The way each character spoke, in regard to their tones, accents, and dialogues, really spoke true to their ages, mannerisms, and personalities. Isabel spoke in such a way an adult would; its hard to explain how, but I understood it right when she started speaking. Panny’s mannerisms were expressed in more of a childish nature. The innocence and child-like sense of the world really showed through with the way she acted. Lefty’s demeanor and strong voice projected maturity, and it was obvious with his interactions to Panny that he truly cared about her. In relation to the play, their dialogue was immaculate when it came to staying true to the written script. I could definitely recall all their dialogue from when I read the play a couple nights beforehand. The actors did an amazing job at keeping the dialogue flowing and not messing up any words or messing up the transitions.

Sound effects and lighting are often big aspects in the production of a play, even if one might not notice the importance of them at first. The atmosphere of BFE as I read the script before and watched the play later stayed the same for both mediums. It was a dark, sort of muted atmosphere, sometimes supported with dark comedy. Because the subject of this play deals with somber and disheartening themes, the dark comedic relief created a wonderful balance. The sound effects happened right on cue, and I did not notice any early or late effects. Some of my favorite sound effects were the TV noises and the melancholy music. The gloomy music pieces paired perfectly and enhanced the mood and general essence of the play. I was really impressed with the music choices; they were timed well and were not too loud so that they could otherwise distract from the character dialogue and actions. In my opinion, nothing detracted the mood of the play. In regard to lighting, I noticed that when there was only one character speaking, the lighting shined directly above him/her and not anywhere else. This enhanced the effect of keeping focus on them only and not on the background.

The clarity of the story translated very well into the live action play. Each character spoke clearly and loud enough to distinguish what was happening. Sometimes, it is hard to understand what an actor is saying if he/her has an accent or their tone is different than the others. In this case, none of that happened, and I understood their words. One thing I did have a slight problem with was some conversation felt rushed because some spoke a little too fast. Specifically, with Evvie’s character, her fast paced and bubbly personality let her speak excitedly, but it was hard one or two times to know her exact words because she spoke quickly during the scenes with Lefty at the department store. I strongly believe that if an audience member didn’t have any background knowledge on this play and had not read anything about BFE, they would still have no hard time knowing what was going on during this. Although at first the play seems to have multiple plots which cut each other off kind of abruptly, it is easy to catch up because the scenes have defining moments that make it clear of what is going on. The cast did a great job at developing their body language while interacting with the characters, that it was easy to remember what was going on between each scene as it got cut off into another one, and back to that one right after. For example, with the scene of Isabel and Jack eating pizza and drinking wine, they run off to pleasure each other. Right when this happens, the scene changes into something else with Lefty and Evvie, or Panny and the man. After those scenes end, it goes right back to where this scene left off: Isabel and Jack come running back in with their clothes and hair disheveled. It is obvious what happened, and their body language gets our attention right back on track to their respective scenes.

The characterization of the actors to their characters was done in such a way that there were many notable scenes. Of the most important was the climax, when the man takes Panny to the desert to rape her. During this tense scene, he wants to put a blonde wig on her, and the tension and creepiness is captured by their vocal and physical choices. It grabs the audience’s attention so well that I remember everyone was completely silent because we were glued to what was going on. If the actors hadn’t done such a good job encompassing the core of their characters, this scene wouldn’t have been half as memorable as it was.

Overall, I was blown away at how this piece came to life onstage. Before watching it, I was unsure about how some aspects would translate into live action; I even discussed this with a friend before we watched the play together. During and after the play ended, everything from the costumes, to the lighting, and to the actors themselves were done in such an astounding way that it left a remarkable impression on me. BFE is a powerful play that must be seen in person by anyone in search of the meaning of diversity with Asians.